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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes results of a survey conducted to learn how school districts include students in ungraded or multi-grade classes or programs in state and district large-scale assessments. The survey was responded to by 72 special education directors, assistant superintendents, and supervisors in at least 50 large urban school districts. Major findings include: (1) most respondents indicate that they had some students with disabilities enrolled in ungraded classes and programs; (2) students with severe and/or low incidence disabilities or those outside the K-12 system are most likely to be assigned to multi-age/multi-grade classrooms; (3) most students in multi-age/multi-grade classrooms participate in state and district assessments and accountability systems; (4) a small number of respondents indicated that students with disabilities in multi-age/multi-grade classes do not participate in such assessments; (5) respondents indicated that students with disabilities may be assigned to a testing grade based on either age, instructional level, or individualized education program goal; (6) fewer than half of respondents stated that their districts report the scores of students with disabilities in multi-age/multi-grade classes with those of their same age peers; and (7) scores of students with disabilities in multi-age/multi-grade classes are frequently reported in a separate category. Results support the need for clearer guidelines for reporting students' scores and including them in the accountability system as intended by the No Child Left Behind Act. (DB)

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EPRRI *Issue Brief Four*

How do Students with Disabilities in Ungraded Programs Participate in Large-Scale Assessments?

Results of a Survey of School District Administrators

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Table of Contents

Issue Brief Highlights	2
Introduction	4
Method	7
Results	7
Discussion	15
Conclusion	17
References	17

How do Students with Disabilities in Ungraded Programs Participate in Large-Scale Assessments? Results of a Survey of School District Administrators

Issue Brief Highlights

Accountability for the achievement of all students toward challenging grade level academic content standards is at the core of Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. The Act requires the participation of all students in state and district assessments, in specified subjects, at the grade level in which they are enrolled.

This Issue Brief investigates how a sample of urban school districts in the United States include students in ungraded or multi-grade classes or programs in state and district large-scale assessments. The survey was conducted in a non-random sample of large school districts that are members of the Urban Special Education Collaborative at the Educational Development Center. From this survey, we learned that:

- Most school districts that responded to this survey indicate that they had some students with disabilities enrolled in ungraded classes and programs.
- Although students across all disability categories and age ranges may be assigned to multi-age/multi-age classrooms, students with severe and/or low incidence disabilities or those outside the K-12 system are more likely to be assigned to multi-age/multi-grade classrooms.
- Most students in multi-age/multi-grade classrooms participate in state and district assessments and accountability systems.

- A small number of responses indicate that students with disabilities in multi-age/multi-grade classes do not participate in state and district assessments and accountability systems.
- Responses indicate that students with disabilities in multi-age/multi-grade classrooms may be assigned to a testing grade based on their age, or their instructional level, or based on their IEP goals.
- Fewer than half of our respondents stated that their districts report the scores of students with disabilities in ungraded or multi-age classrooms with those of their same age peers.
- The scores of students with disabilities in multi-age/multi-grade classes are frequently reported in a separate category.

As the results of this survey indicate, although most of the respondents reported that students with disabilities in ungraded classrooms participated in large-scale assessments, some districts continue to exempt these students from testing. Districts need clearer guidelines for reporting students' scores and including them in the accountability system as intended in NCLB.

introduction

The Education Policy Reform Research Institute, (EPRRI), funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, investigates the impact of accountability systems on students with disabilities and on special education. EPRRI has a national focus on accountability and students with disabilities.

Accountability for the achievement of all students toward challenging grade level academic content standards is at the core of Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The Act requires the participation of all students in state and district assessments in English Language Arts, Mathematics, and in 2007-8, science:

> *. . . Each State plan shall demonstrate that the State educational agency, in consultation with local educational agencies, has implemented a set of high-quality, yearly student academic assessments that include, at a minimum, academic assessments in mathematics, reading or language arts, and science (SEC 1111 (b) (3) (A)) and. . .provide for the participation in such assessments of all studen s (SEC. 1111 (b) (3) (C) (ix) (I))*

In addition, the Final Regulations clarify that the State's academic assessment system must provide appropriate accommodations determined by the student's IEP team, that are necessary to measure the performance of the student relative to the State's academic content and achievement standards for the grade in which the student is enrolled:

(a) Students eligible under IDEA and Section 504. (1) Appropriate accommodations. A State's academic assessment system must provide—

(i) For each student with disabilities, as defined under section 602(3) of the IDEA, appropriate accommodations that each student's IEP team determines are necessary to measure the academic achievement of the student relative to the State's academic content and achievement standards for the grade in which the student is enrolled, consistent with

SEC. 200.1(b)(2), (b)(3). (34 CFR Part 200 (200.6 (a)1(i) (ii))

As the discussion accompanying the Final Regulations reveals, the Department of Education received a number of comments concerning the requirement for on grade level assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Commenters expressed concern that requiring grade-level testing for students with disabilities would be unfair both to individual students and to schools enrolling such students. Nevertheless, the Department of Education reiterated that one of the bedrock principles of the NCLB Act is that all students can learn to high standards:

Too often in the past, schools and LEAs have not expected students with disabilities to meet the same grade-level standards as other students. The NCLB Act sought to correct this problem by requiring each State to develop grade-level academic content and achievement standards that it expects all students—including students with disabilities— to meet, and by holding schools and LEAs responsible for all students meeting those standards. As a result, the Act requires that challenging academic content and student achievement standards be applied to all schools and students in the State

(U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 71741).

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How do Students with Disabilities in Ungraded Classes Participate?

Clearly, federal law requires that all students participate in state and local assessments and that the scores of all students be reported. According to Thompson, Thurlow and Lazarus (2001) all students should be included in the accountability system. This includes students with disabilities in ungraded and multi-age classroom.

Based on data from the 23rd Annual Report on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2001), 47.4% of students with disabilities ages 6-21 spend more than 80% of their time in general education classes. Furthermore, virtually all students (96%) are now served in regular school buildings. However, we have no information relative to the grade level assignment of these students. While we assume that most students with disabilities are assigned to graded classrooms, ungraded or multi-level classrooms do exist. Little is known about how students in ungraded programs are included in large-scale assessments and how the scores of those who participate are reported.

Part of EPRRI's research is to highlight emerging issues related to the implementation of accountability reform with students with disabilities. This Issue Brief reports the results of a survey conducted to learn how school districts in the United States include students in ungraded or multi-grade classes or programs in state and district large-scale assessments. The survey was conducted in a non-random sample of large school districts that are members of the Urban Special Education Collaborative at the Educational Development Center. The purpose of the survey was to determine the extent to which students with disabilities are assigned to ungraded classes and how those students are included in state and district accountability systems.

Method

An online survey (available through the EPRRI website, www.eprri.org) was conducted during May 2002 with 175 special education directors, assistant superintendents, and supervisors in 80 school districts that are members of the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative. Survey participants responded anonymously. A follow-up fax survey was sent in July to only the special education directors in an attempt to limit multiple responses from a given district. A total of 72 responses were received from at least 50 individual school districts. Given that responses were anonymous, it was not possible to calculate the response rate for districts.

An online survey was conducted during May 2002 with 175 special education directors, assistant superintendents, and supervisors in 80 school districts that are members of the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative.

Results

Characteristics of Survey Respondents and Their School Districts

School districts in 24 states are represented in the survey. However, it is important to point out that data displayed in the tables reflects the number of completed surveys received and not the number of districts. Some respondents came from the same districts, and it is important to note that the numbers and percentages in the tables represent duplicated districts. For example, although we received 12 completed surveys from Texas, we determined that they represented 6 school districts.

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As shown in Table 1, 87.5% of the survey respondents worked in school districts that were primarily urban, and the remaining 12.5% worked in suburban districts.

Table 1. Geographic location of survey respondents' school districts

	Respondents	Percent of Sample
School Districts		
Primarily Urban	63	87.5
Primarily Suburban	9	12.5
Total	72	100

	Respondents	Percent of Sample
State		
Arizona	2	2.8
California	3	4.2
Florida	5	6.9
Illinois	3	4.2
Indiana	4	5.6
Maryland	1	1.4
Massachusetts	9	12.5
Michigan	1	1.4
Missouri	2	2.8
Nevada	1	1.4
New Jersey	1	1.4
New York	4	5.6
Ohio	3	4.2
Pennsylvania	3	4.2
Rhode Island	1	1.4
South Dakota	1	1.4
Tennessee	5	6.9
Texas	12	16.7
Utah	1	1.4
Virginia	4	5.6
Virgin Islands	1	1.4
Washington	3	4.2
Washington, D.C.	1	1.4
Wisconsin	1	1.4
Total	72	100

The survey respondents worked in districts that varied greatly in size. Some 38.9% of the respondents were employed by districts with more than 50,000 students, while about a fourth represented districts with fewer than 15,000 students. Table 2 provides information concerning respondents' positions by school type. We asked respondents to select from elementary school level, middle school level, or high school level, the students with disabilities for whom they were responsible. Sixty-two of the respondents (86%) were responsible for multi-levels or grades indicating that they were responsible for students with disabilities across two or more of the levels. However, 10 respondents (15%) indicated that they primarily worked at the elementary, middle, or high school level.

Table 2. Survey respondents worked at elementary, middle and high school levels

	Respondents	Percent
Preschool	0	0.0
Elementary School	7	9.7
Middle School/Junior High	1	1.4
High School	2	2.8
Multiple Levels	62	86.1
	72	100

Ninety-three percent of the respondents indicated that their school districts assigned at least some students with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 21 to ungraded and/or multi-age/ multi-grade special education classes or programs.

Who is Assigned to Multi-Graded Classrooms?

A major purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which students with disabilities were assigned to ungraded and or multi-age/multi-grade classrooms. Ninety-three percent of the respondents indicated that their school districts assigned at least some students with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 21 to ungraded and/or multi-age/ multi-grade special education classes or programs. Only 5.6% of the respondents indicated that their district had no students with disabilities in multi-grade classes or programs. One respondent (representing 1.4% of the total responses) did not know whether his or her district had students with

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disabilities between the ages of 3 and 21 assigned to ungraded and/or multi-age/multi-grade special education classes or programs.

We asked respondents to select all applicable descriptions of students with disabilities who may be assigned to ungraded or multi-age/multi-grade classrooms. In 88.9% of the respondents' districts, students with low-incidence and/or severe disabilities aged 6-18 were assigned to multi-age/multi-grade classes or programs. In addition, over half (54.2%) of the respondents stated that students with high-incidence and/or mild disabilities aged 6-18 were assigned to multi-age/multi-grade classes or programs (Table 3). Over 70% of respondents indicated that students with disabilities aged 3-5 may be assigned to ungraded and or multi-age/multi-grade classrooms. A further 65.2% of respondents indicated that students with disabilities aged 18-21 were assigned to ungraded and or multi-age/multi-grade classrooms.

In addition, over half (54.2 %) of the respondents stated that students with high-incidence and/or mild disabilities aged 6-18 were assigned to multi-age/ multi-grade classes or programs

In addition, data from Table 3 indicates that ungraded and or multi-age/multi-grade classrooms are located in a variety of educational environments. Over three-quarters of respondents indicated that their districts operated ungraded and/or multi-age/multi-grade classrooms within regular public schools. A third of the respondents indicated that at least some of the students in their districts in multi-grade classes might be enrolled in state-operated schools for the deaf or blind. Slightly less than half (48.6%) responded that his or her district had students in juvenile justice programs with multi-grade classes. Three respondents selected "other" on the survey form and indicated that students with disabilities in ungraded programs could be placed with contractual agencies, and private day and residential programs.

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Table 3. Types of students with disabilities assigned to ungraded and/or multi-age/multi-grade classrooms or programs.

	Number of Responses	Percent of Responses
Students with severe/low incidence disabilities between ages 6-18	64	88.9
Students with mild/high incidence disabilities between ages 6-18	39	54.2
Students age 18-21	51	70.8
Early childhood (ages 3-5)	47	65.2
Students in self-contained programs within regular public schools	55	76.4
Public school students in centers or day programs	34	47.2
Students attending state operated schools (e.g., schools for the deaf or blind)	24	33.3
Students in the juvenile justice system	35	48.6
Students in interim alternative educational settings	31	43.1
Other	3	4.2
Total Responses	383	

Students in Multi-Grade Classrooms and Participation in Large-Scale Assessments

Survey respondents were asked whether students with disabilities (ages 6-18) who were assigned to ungraded or multi-age/multi-grade classes participated in state and district assessments. The overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that most of those students do participate in state and district large-scale assessments. Only 8.3% of the respondents reported that all students with disabilities in ungraded or multi-age/multi-grade classes were exempt from participating in state and district assessments in their school district. As Table 4 shows, a number of respondents listed more than one way that these students in their district participated in state and district assessments. The most common responses were participation in alternate assessments or the regular assessments with accommodations.

The overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that most of those students do participate in state and district large-scale assessments.

Table 4. Participation of students in ungraded or multi-grade special education classes in state and district assessments

	Responses	Percent of Responses
All students in ungraded or multi-grade classes or programs are exempt	6	8.3
Most students participate in state and district assessments	66	91.7
in alternate assessments	41	62.1
in general assessments with accommodations	42	63.6
in general assessments at a grade level that is lower than that of their same-age peers	8	12.1
in another way	8	12.1
Total Responses	171	

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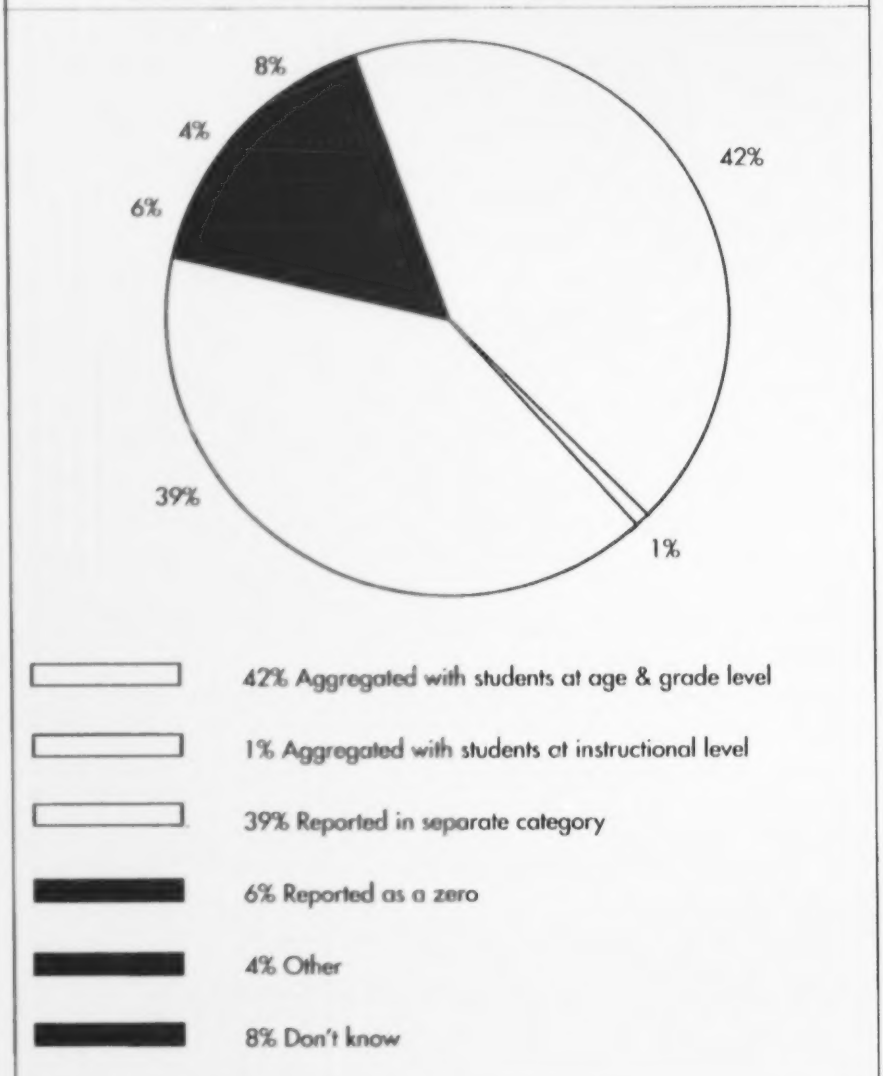
How are Students Assigned to a Testing Grade?

Respondents were asked how their school district assigned grade levels to students with disabilities in ungraded programs in order to administer state or district assessments (including alternate assessment) and/or accountability. Respondents were instructed to select all descriptions that apply. Almost 57% of respondents indicated that their school districts assign grade levels based upon the students' ages (see Table 5). Twenty-two respondents (30.6%) indicated that their district assigned grade levels to students in ungraded and/or multi-grade/multi-age classrooms based on each student's instructional level. In addition, twenty-one respondents indicated that the decision was based on the individual student's IEP goals. Only 5.6% of respondents indicated that their districts made assignments based on program status meaning that all students in a particular program were assigned the same grade level test regardless of age. Several respondents checked the "other" category, but noted that their district based the decision on "the student's grade level."

Table 5. How school districts assigned grade/test levels to students with disabilities in ungraded programs for assessment purposes

	Respondents	Percent
Based on student age	41	56.9
Based on instructional level	22	30.6
Based on IEP goals	21	29.2
Based on program status	4	5.6
Other	9	12.5
Total Responses	97	

Figure 1. District reporting practices for students with disabilities in ungraded and/or multi-grade/multi-age classrooms: Participant responses. (n=72)



How are Test Scores Reported

The test scores of students with disabilities in ungraded programs were reported by school districts in a number of different ways. We asked respondents to indicate the reporting practice that, to their knowledge, best described their districts approach to reporting the test scores of this population. As shown in Figure 1, 42% of respondents indicated that their districts included the scores of students with disabilities in ungraded and/or multi-age/multi-grade classrooms with those of all the other students at the grade level that matched the student's age. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents said that their districts reported the scores of students with disabilities in ungraded programs in a separate category (e.g., alternate assessment or out-of-level test category). Only 1% of the districts included the scores of students in ungraded programs at the grade level that matched the student's instructional level or IEP goals. Some respondents checked "other" qualified how such students' scores might be reported. For example, some stated that scores were reported separately, except for alternate assessments. Also noted, was that scores were reported at the IEP meeting.

These findings suggest that assigning students with disabilities to ungraded and/or multi-grade/multi-age classes remains part of the continuum of placement options available for students with disabilities.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which students with disabilities were assigned to ungraded and or multi-age/multi-grade classrooms and to ascertain how those students were included in state and district accountability systems. Despite the fact that the sample was not randomly selected from among all school districts in the U.S., the responses are informative.

Most of the school districts that responded to this survey had some students with disabilities in ungraded classes or programs. These findings suggest that assigning students with disabilities to ungraded and/or multi-grade/multi-age classes remains part of the continuum of placement options available for students with disabilities.

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In addition, these findings indicate that students across all disability categories and all age ranges may be assigned to ungraded or multi-age/multi-grade classrooms. However, responses do suggest that students with severe and/or low incidence disabilities or those outside the K-12 system may be more likely to be assigned to ungraded and/or multi-age/multi-grade classrooms.

This survey sheds light on the ways in which some of the larger school districts in the United States are including students with disabilities who are assigned to ungraded or multi-grade classes or programs in state and district assessments and accountability systems. Over 90% of respondents indicated that students in ungraded and or multi-age/multi-grade classrooms participated in state and district assessments. This is a positive finding and suggests that most urban school districts in this study are aware of the federal requirement that students with disabilities participate in large-scale assessments. Respondents indicated that these students were included in a variety of ways such as taking the general assessments with accommodations or using an alternate assessment. However, nearly 10% of the respondents reported that all students in ungraded programs were exempt from state and district assessments, even though the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and The No Child Left Behind Act both require participation of all students (with the exception of incarcerated students over the age of 18).

Survey results also revealed that fewer than half of respondents stated that their districts report the test scores of students in ungraded classes with those of other students at the grade level that matched the student's age. In many cases, the scores of students with disabilities placed in ungraded or multi-age classes are reported in a separate category from those of other students.

Over 90% of respondents indicated that students in ungraded and or multi-age/multi-grade classrooms participated in state and district assessments.

Survey results also revealed that fewer than half of respondents stated that their districts report the test scores of students in ungraded classes with those of other students at the grade level that matched the student's age.

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Conclusion

These findings suggest that school districts understand that students in ungraded classes should participate in state and district assessments. Moreover, the results of this survey suggest that most students with disabilities in ungraded and/or multi-grade/multi-age classrooms participate in ways similar to other students with disabilities, for example, with appropriate accommodations or in alternate assessments. However, districts may need clear guidance as to how the students' assessment results should be reported and included in the accountability system. Given that one of the purposes of reporting performance of students on state and district assessments is to hold schools accountable for the success of all students, then aggregating the scores from all students in the grade level tested is an equitable approach to reporting.

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Given that one of the purposes of reporting performance of students on state and district assessments is to hold schools accountable for the success of all students, then aggregating the scores from all students in the grade level tested is an equitable approach to reporting.

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